

THE LESSON OF THE HOUR.

JUSTICE AS WELL AS MERCY.

A DISCOURSE

PREACHED ON THE SABBATH FOLLOWING THE

Assassination of the President,

IN THE

CAPITOL HILL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

WASHINGTON, D. C.,

BY THE PASTOR,

REV. JOHN CHESTER.

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SERMON.

“HOW ARE THE MIGHTY FALLEN!”—II SAMUEL, 1, 19.

The President of the United States is dead! He whom for more than four years we have looked up to more as a father than a ruler; the kind-hearted, the true-hearted, the wise-hearted President has fallen.

A few days ago I saw him standing at the window of his mansion, his face irradiated with a genial smile, which showed the warm heart within. I heard the kind, generous, forbearing words he spoke in the hours of triumph, and heard the cry ascend from many a lip, in a tone that showed it came from the heart, “God bless you, Abraham Lincoln.” A few hours ago, at midnight, a messenger knocked at my door, and breathed in faltering accents the awful tidings, “The President is murdered!!”

Oh, can it be? Is it not a dream? Can it be, that even in this sinful world sin has reached such a height as to assassinate our Chief Magistrate, and folly such a pitch as to murder him whose leniency they now so much needed?

But an hour of trial is an hour of duty. While God permits his people to weep, and even sympathizes with them in their sorrow, yet he summons them to fulfil their stern duty. You have come this morning to the sanctuary of God, not only to pray and praise, but to be taught your duty. It is, I believe, the time when the minister of the Gospel is charged with a grave and responsible task, That task is like Aaron's of old, when

he stood "between the living and the dead."* Then, as now, the crime of rebellion had brought a fearful judgment on the people. God commanded his ministers, Moses and Aaron, to direct the people to separate themselves from the leaders of that rebellion, that a righteous judgment might overtake them.† Jehovah changes not. The principle of justice on which he deals with his creatures changes not. The message which he entrusted to his ministers then to deliver to his people, is the message which we believe he entrusts to them now.

But first, let us take our own place in the dust before his throne. "I and my people have sinned." God is punishing us for these sins. We have been proud, and depended too much on our own strength. God has shown us how weak and defenceless we are without his strengthening and sheltering arm. We have trusted too much to the wisdom of our rulers and the skill of our generals. God has removed the one, and by an hair-breadth escape, shown how easily He could have removed the other. He wants to withdraw us from leaning too heavily on the feeble arm of man, that we may lean more on that of the Almighty. We have permitted that accursed thing, human slavery, to grow up and flourish under a Constitution which proclaimed liberty to the oppressed. We have permitted men to fill the high places of the nation whose wealth has been extorted from the sweat of the brow of the oppressed, and whose power has been maintained by their blood. God has made us to shed our blood to defend our country from the assaults of these men on its liberties.

And now He has put the cup again to our lips. We thought it had been drained to its bottom; but we had yet to taste its dregs—the bitterest draught of all. Our President has been assassinated!!

Our President, we say, for he was emphatically the people's

*Numbers xvi: 48.

†Numbers xvi: 24-26.

President, chosen by their hearts as well as by their votes. One who had the affection of the masses more than any who preceded him, (except it be Washington.) One who was esteemed by the lovers of liberty throughout the world. One whose most prominent trait was kindness of heart to all. One who stood firm "amid the raging of the people," and conscientiously and fearlessly discharged his duty amid the taunts and sneers of a vile faction. One who guided the helm of State so skillfully amid the Scylla of domestic treason and the Charybdis of foreign intervention, that it extorted from the press of England and Europe a reluctant but necessary admiration. This man has fallen! Just at the period when the sun of our country had reached its meridian splendor, *his* sun was suddenly eclipsed.

And now, who is to answer for the blood of this man?

It should be laid at the door of those people of the so-called "Southern Confederacy," who have in their public press clamored for the commission of this very deed; who have advertised for means to carry out the diabolical scheme; who have asked contributions to it as "toward a patriotic purpose;" and at the door of men who would permit such things to appear in their public press unrebuked.*

It should be laid again at the door of that spirit of rebellion against the rightful authority, which they have fostered in their hearts and acted out in their lives. The very same spirit which

*The following appears in the advertising column of the *Selma (Ala.) Despatch*, copied in the *National Republican* January 26, 1865:

"ONE MILLION DOLLARS WANTED TO HAVE PEACE BY THE 1ST OF MARCH.—If the citizens of the Southern Confederacy will furnish me with the cash, or good securities, for the sum of one million dollars, I will cause the lives of Abraham Lincoln, William H. Seward, and Andrew Johnson to be taken by the 1st of March next. This will give us Peace, and satisfy the world that cruel tyrants cannot live in a "land of liberty." If this is not accomplished, nothing will be claimed beyond the sum of fifty thousand dollars, in advance, which is supposed to be necessary to reach and slaughter the three "villains.

"I will give, myself, one thousand dollars towards *this patriotic purpose*. Every one wishing to contribute will address Box K, Cahaba, Alabama.

"December 1, 1864."

would strike a blow at the Government of this country is the very spirit that would strike one at the head of that Government. The very war that the South inaugurated four years ago by concentrating the fire of a dozen forts upon a helpless garrison, in the harbor of Charleston, is the very spirit that would make an assassin skulk behind an unprotected man and fire upon him. The very spirit that would delight in the miseries of the captives who fell into their hands—which would starve them to death in their prisons—which would hunt them with blood-hounds when they tried to escape from the horrid bondage—which would light with the incendiary torch the dwellings of our Northern cities, is the very one that would revel in the thought that the fatal blow had been inflicted on the head of our President.

It should be laid at the door of Slavery. The very same spirit which has held so long thousands of its fellow men, born in the image of God, in bondage—which would sell them at the auction block like cattle—which would lacerate them with the whip—which would stand by and see husband and wife and parent and child separated for the sake of money, and yet defend slavery as a "Divine institution," is the very same spirit which the Savior spoke of when he said "Verily, he who killeth you will think he doeth God service." It is the very school whose course of education could graduate such an assassin as him who crept up to a sick man's bed under the pretence of mercy, and then endeavored to murder him as he lay in all the helplessness of suffering. Slavery has begot many such children, and now, in her last dying throes, she has brought forth this Monstrosity of Sin.

It should be laid at the doors of those in the North who have aided and sympathized with the rebels—who have tried to weaken the hands of this Government while it was endeavoring to maintain its rightful authority—who have held up our kind

President as "a tyrant" who ought to be deposed—who have heaped names upon him which, if true, would make him merit death—who have taught this people in secret societies to plot treason, and encouraged armed resistance to the efforts of the Government to draft soldiers for its defence. Who can dare deny that the very spirit that manifested itself in the city of New York in the summer of 1863 is the very spirit that manifested itself in the city of Washington during this last week? That those who would burn down an Orphan Asylum, and roast Negroes in the streets, would not hesitate to perpetrate the crime of assassinating the President?

Just as the clothes of that holy man Stephen were laid at the feet of "that young man Saul," who, though not casting a stone himself, sympathized with those that did, and therefore "consented to his death," so ought the clothes—the blood-stained garments of our President—to be laid at the feet of these men, yea, women, saying, "What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto God from the ground against thee."

I trust that I address none such this morning, but if one such is under the sound of my voice, I warn you that you have blood on your skirts—that it becomes you this day to repent of your sins if you wish to escape the justice of God and the jaws of hell.

And now, we approach a part of this subject to which is invited your most serious and thoughtful consideration. It is a point to which I have myself given much prayerful attention, and which certainly demands the same of every well-wisher of his country. I ask no one to adopt these views without first comparing them with the teachings of the Bible; but I ask you also not to reject them without the same examination.

The question is, whether this sad calamity is not meant in mercy, to rouse us to act justly towards the leaders and foment-

ers of this rebellion? Four years ago the people of this country could hardly be made to believe that, if the Union was to be preserved, the whole armed power of the Government must be called into requisition, and conciliatory measures exchanged for forcible suppression. Then came that attack on Fort Sumter, which dissipated the theory of pacification to the winds, and forced from loyal people of the North the cry for vengeance on the men who were dipping their swords in the life-blood of the Republic. Just so now. God finds some of this people, after a struggle which has cost rivers of blood, expecting to end this nefarious rebellion by conciliatory measures with its leaders and fomenters. Let conciliatory measures be shown in abundance to their poor deluded followers, who have long since seen their folly, and for many months have longed to hear the tramp of that army which should free them from their oppressors. But to the men whose hands are stained with the blood of our fathers, brothers and sons—to the men who have, by the most wicked lies, “fired the Southern heart”—whose hearts have not one particle of repentance, but who would still destroy this Government if they had the power—to such let *justice* (we do not ask for revenge, only for justice) be meted out. *Let it be a justice that will deprive them of the opportunity of repeating the crime.*

We claim this as a duty enjoined on our rulers by the Word of God. God has given them on this subject, the following plain directions:—“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same. For he is the minister of God to thee for good.”

That is, Government is not to be feared except by evil doers. But that God does intend it shall be feared by evil doers, and that they shall not escape punishment is evident, for he adds, "But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain, for he is the minister of God." That is, he acts as the delegated authority of God, and as such God commands him to be "a revenger, to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." Now we present to the consciences of any who have scruples on this subject, this question: Can this Government refuse "to execute wrath upon those who have done evil" by resisting its rightful authority, when God says in so doing they have resisted him? Can they do it without disobeying the plain injunction of His Word? Do you want to know how God views rebellion? You will find his opinion in I Samuel, xv: 23—"For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft;" and the punishment he commanded to be dealt to the witch, you will find in Exodus, xxii: 18—"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Yes, this people are now in danger of the very sin which they were guilty of before this war. Then they were in danger of having a sinful complicity with slavery by undue leniency to the crimes of the slaveholders. Now may they not be in danger of a sinful complicity with rebellion by an undue leniency to the crimes of its leaders?

But it is urged that we ought to be merciful to our enemies if we wish to obtain mercy in the day of judgment. Well, if the Bible is true, no one will obtain mercy at God's hands that does not first repent of his sins. "Repent and believe, and ye shall be saved." Yea, they must first forsake them. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon." Let these men show a sincere and hearty repentance of their sin of rebellion; let them return unto this Government with a full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience, and

we admit that leniency ought to be shown them. But when they are captured in their sins; fighting to the very last moment, and only giving up because they are conquered; not because they are less desirous of success, then we say treat them just as God will treat the man whom he finds rebelling against him at the hour of death, giving up then his course of sin only because he has not the opportunity of pushing it further.

But it is urged again Christ prayed for the forgiveness of his enemies, and we should imitate his spirit and forgive ours. Yes, but the same Savior wept over those very enemies, because he saw their persistent rebellion must cause the wrath of God to come upon them and their guilty city;* for even his mercy had no longer any argument why justice should forbear to punish. If you will read the account of Josephus, of how God permitted the crucifiers of Christ to be punished in the destruction of Jerusalem, you will read a catalogue of horrors such as even this war cannot equal. Oh, yes, God punishes the wicked when they do not repent of their sins and return to Him, and wo to that land whose rulers bear the sword in vain, when God has given it to them "to be a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." There may be such a thing as mistaking a complicity with sin for mercy.

No, we put this question to you: Is there a man or woman who would dare to advocate the doctrine that if the assassin of Mr. Lincoln could be found he should be permitted to go free. But why is his guilt so extraordinary? Not only because he murdered a being created in the image of God. You feel that there was something more than this. What most stirs our hearts and arouses our righteous indignation, is the fact that he was our President; that in him was embodied the Government of this land. Yet these men who have been for four years

Luke xix: 41-44.

aiming a parricidal blow at this very Government some contend should go free.

I am well aware of the cry that may be raised at ministers of the Gospel advocating such sentiments; but just so was it raised years ago, when ministers of the Gospel undertook to denounce slavery and the complicity of this Government with it as a sin against God and man. This country has lived to see that they were right, and only to regret that it did not sooner heed the warning. So now the time will come as surely as there is a righteous God, when, if this people let this sin of rebellion go unpunished, they will repent it in sackcloth and ashes.

Methinks I see rising from the dead a host of wounded, mangled bodies, in whom is recognized the forms of our sons, brothers, fathers, who have lain weltering in blood before the skilfully erected fortifications of our adversaries; or who died of wasting disease while waiting through long, weary months on the Peninsula, striving to capture the citadel of rebellion; or who were starved to death by a slow but sure process in Belle Isle and Andersonville. Methinks I see their skeleton fingers pointing to these men—these leaders—walking our streets in undisturbed repose, having a safe conduct given them to their homes, or an easy passage to distant lands, where they can wave their laurels amidst the pæans of admiring sympathizers. I see them thus rise from the dead and demand of this Republic:—Is this the fruit of our labors; the reward of our suffering? Is this what you call mercy? If it is, why then did you not show it to us? You asked our blood to save the country, while you spare the blood of these men who have tried to destroy it! Oh, yes, “the voice of the blood of our patriots crieth unto God from the ground for vengeance.”

This, then, we believe to be *the lesson of the hour*. The importance of inflicting the heaviest penalties of the law on the

unprincipled, unrepentant leaders and instigators of this rebellion, while mercy is shown, with a wise discrimination, to their misguided and repentant followers.

Under the light of this truth, *the duty of the hour* also becomes plain:—To see that by the hands of the lawful authorities this punishment is meted out, and to uphold their hands in their endeavors to do it. Refrain from all acts that would take the law into your own hands. We have law in this land, and, thank God, we have proved over and over during the last four years that we have power to execute it. If it is important that it should be executed, it is equally important that it should be executed by the lawfully constituted authorities. Next to rebellion there is nothing worse than mob law. It is anarchy, and anarchy is the sister spirit of rebellion. We have every reason to believe, from the history of his past life, that our present President will not shrink from doing his whole duty in this respect. Let us hold up his hands if we wish to see the majesty of the law vindicated, and the country purged of treason.

The next duty is to possess our souls in peace as to fears of personal injury. At such a time as this there is naturally a fear of personal violence. When assassins are abroad even good men tremble. But, my hearer, your safety is in doing your duty to your God and country. Such He hides under the shadow of His wings. Or, if they fall at their posts, he gives them a martyr's crown. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." But oh, learn the uncertainty of life, and the necessity of constant preparation for death. Then you can look death in the face with calmness, in whatever form it may come.

Be reminded also by this calamity of the necessity of constant prayer for the preservation of the lives of your rulers. Probably all of us in our time of triumph have had a feeling of

security concerning them, which made us relax our efforts in this particular. What a lesson have we received in the necessity of its constant practice. Yes, let us also remember "to commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator," that His grace may swell in their hearts, and His wisdom inspire their minds.

And now, amid the gloom which naturally gathers around your hearts, let me point you to some encouraging truths. God is still on His throne. Blessed truth! Yea, though "clouds and darkness are round about Him, righteousness and judgment are the habitation of His throne." He may hide His face from us for a moment, but it no more affects his purposes of mercy than the passing cloud affects the undiminished glories of the sun. He may even suffer our rulers to be assassinated by the hands of wicked men, just as he permitted his chosen, anointed king, Saul, to be pierced by the arrow of the wicked. But it will no more affect the stability of our Government than it did that of Israel's. Then God raised up a David to avenge the fearful crime, and gave Israel a power and a glory which it had never before reached. Human governments which have been instituted by God will also be maintained by Him. Who can doubt that the Government of this country, laid amid the prayers of so many of His precious saints, and baptised with the blood of our fathers in the Revolution, was instituted by Him? Verily, then, He will maintain it. Verily, He has already given us an earnest of the fact. He has parted the waters of this rebellion, and enabled our rulers to bear the ark of our liberties safely through the bloody sea. Verily that ark he will still preserve, until, after its perilous journeyings, it finds a permanent abode in the inmost shrine of freedom's temple.

And now we visit, in thought, the lifeless body of our late President.

Lay there quietly in thy last sleep, oh beloved dust!!
Around thy body the sentinels this day keep watch, but around
thy memory our hearts shall keep guard in this generation, and
then commit the sacred trust to our children's children.

Sleep there calmly. Thou under whose Administration a
race has broken its shackles and risen from its degradation.
Over thy bier this day, that race is shedding more heartfelt
tears than ever before moistened the couch of an earthly ruler.

Sleep there, environed by all the glory of thy nation's fame.
Thou, who enteredst the Presidential chair in the time of thy
nation's trial, and left it not until thine eyes beheld its triumph.
The lovers of freedom throughout the world respect thy worth.

Sleep there, eloquent even in death. "Though being dead,
thou yet speaketh." "Thy blood crieth unto God from the
ground for vengeance." The assassin's weapon only deprived
thy body of life; thou still livest, enshrined in our hearts,
and nations yet unborn shall rise up and call thee blessed.



